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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I don't propose to answer that question in a direct way, nor do I intend to muse about how a rose might smell if it were called an onion.

I have had some experience with names ("pseudo" and otherwise) during the blacklist era, and I've noticed that I, like many of my fellow blacklistees, tended to choose names that had some connection -- not necessarily literal -- with themselves, or with people to whom they were linked in one way or another.

The name I used most often was Tom August, derived from my (then small) son's first and middle names. It was obvious and logical that when I began to collaborate with my wife, her name became Helen August.

Mike Wilson used names that had no direct link with him, so far as I know, except that some -- James O'Donnell, for example -- reflected his father's Irish heritage.

Waldo Salt's "Mel Davenport" came from his wife's maiden name -- Mary Louise Davenport. M.L., hence Mel.

Dalton Trumbo was characteristically prolific, and had numerous names, the most famous of which was Robert Rich. There was, in fact, a Robert Rich, a nephew of the King brothers. The Kings produced the film, THE BRAVE ONE, which was written by Trumbo -- and credited to Robert Rich.

Mr. Rich was not a writer and had no ambitions to become one. When the movie won a writing Oscar no one came forward

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to accept the trophy -- at first. Then, apparently abhorring the vacuum that had been created, several people claimed to be Robert Rich, and demanded the Oscar they had "won."

I persuaded the King Brothers to acknowledge the true authorship of the film, and solicited the help of Fay and Michael Kanin who presented the data proving the case for Trumbo to the Academy's Board of Directors. It was made official.

Walter Mirisch, then president of the Academy, graciously offered to present the Oscar to Trumbo -- who was very ill -- at the latter's home. His failing health did not diminish Trumbo's sense of public relations. He chose the day before the national magazines went to press for the presentation.

A short time later he died.

Trumbo's death was, for him, a release from the pain of lung cancer. For his family, and for all who were lucky enough to have known him, it was an irreplaceable loss.

There are not very many positive aspects of the blacklist, but one (perhaps the only one) was the fact that the shared experience of that terrible time led to close friendships that might otherwise have remained only acquaintances.

In the meantime, and on a much lower level, I had begun to collaborate, uncredited, with a friend who was not blacklisted. After our first few assignments, he insisted that I take a pseudonym and share the credit on what we write. I argued that if I did that, I'd have to appear for story conferences. Someone might recognize me and "blow the whistle." There wasn't much more they could do to me, I said, but it might endanger his career.

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At about the same time rumors began to circulate that the film had been written by Dalton Trumbo. When confronted with that report by the press Trumbo said: "I make it a matter of principle never to confirm or deny rumors of my authorship of any film that doesn't bear my name. That way I hope to reap some benefit from good pictures with which I had no connection, and avoid being associated with some of the turkeys I really wrote."

Ultimately, the King Brothers acknowledged that Trumbo wrote the story of the boy and the bull, THE BRAVE ONE, and -- belatedly -- he received the Oscar he had won.

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I became a photographer, having had the good fortune to work with, and learn from Alessio de Paola, a man of superb talent and fantastic technical virtuosity.

On an assignment to shoot the opening of a new hotel in Las Vegas, I ran into an old friend from the MGM Writers Table, Jerry Davis. He suggested that we try working together.

I then became an invisible, uncredited partner in a collaboration that worked very well. After our first few assignments, Jerry insisted that I take a pseudonym and share the credit on what we write. I was nervous about that.

He dismissed my concerns, and insisted that I was being paranoid. No one, he assured me, cared about "that stuff" any more. We argued, and I eventually -- and reluctantly -- agreed.

I became Tom August.

Entering a studio was a very tense experience in those early pseudonymous days. The first time, as my collaborator and I headed across a studio to a meeting with a producer, I suddenly stopped and clutched my partner's arm.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I just saw a child actor who's in the Woodcraft Rangers group I lead!"

"So?"

"He knows my real name!"

My collaborator looked astounded, and shook his head in disbelief.

"I've heard of people being afraid of the FBI," he said. "But the Woodcraft Rangers?"

My next experience at a studio was preceded by a lecture from my collaborator.

"Remember," he said, "nobody cares about that ancient history any more. So relax."

I tried, but in spite of my friend's attempts to reassure me, there was still that tension -- the possibility of running into someone who might recognize me. I couldn't rid myself of the sensation that I was on "enemy territory."

As we walked through the halls toward the office of

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the producer with whom we were to meet, I found myself looking around for "hostile forces" -- producers, directors, and other writers who might know me and be antagonistic enough to "blow the whistle."

We arrived at the producer's office. The secretary looked up, and said to me: "Aren't you Al Levitt?"

My collaborator said "Yes, he is." And ran out of the room!

"What's wrong?" the secretary asked. "Is he ill?"

"He's been feeling sick all day," I said, grateful that she supplied an explanation for his bizarre behavior. "We'll have to call and make another appointment."

She nodded sympathetically.

"Incidentally," I added, "I now use the name 'Tom August' for television."

She nodded, and I left. I went down to the parking lot and found my friend sitting in his car. I got in beside him.

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "I panicked," he said.

We ground out a lot of teleplays for that studio. I was asked to produce the show we were working on, but I was afraid it would make me too much of a target. I declined.

My partner was offered a producing post on another show. He accepted it.

I continued to write television scripts as Tom August, and I persuaded my wife, Helen, to "share the pain." She

was reluctant at first. It was, however, a formalization of what had already become standard procedure for us. I had never considered anything I wrote to be finished until I had solicited her criticisms and suggestions, and incorporated them into the script. Now, she would share the pain with me from the project's beginning to its end. Naturally, she became Helen August.

No matter what story problems had us tied in knots; no matter what hassles we had with producers; and no matter how depressed I felt coming out of a torturous story conference, Helen always reacted with a cheerful: "It beats house-work."

We had already built up a long list of television credits when we received a call from our agent, Bob Eisenbach. He reported enthusiastically that he had set up a meeting for Helen and me with Walt Disney.

My response was something like:

"I hope you're kidding!"

He made it clear that he was serious. I made it clear -- irritably and gracelessly clear -- that I could think of no one in the film and television industries with whom we'd have less rapport than we would with Walt Disney.

"Well," said Bob, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but every agent in town is trying to set clients up to meet with Disney on a project he has in mind. Even if you don't want to work for him, you have to keep that appointment. I've invested a lot of time and energy to get you two that opportunity, and you've got to go through the motions, even if you

don't want to work for him.

We felt that his request (his demand, actually) was legitimate. We agreed to keep the date. At least, we consoled ourselves, our young daughter will be thrilled to learn that we had met Walt Disney.

We arrived at the studio and were ushered into the office of Bill Dover, Disney's Executive Story Editor. After a brief period of introductions and small talk, Dover led us to the office of Bill Anderson whose title I don't recall. It was clear, though, that he was an important executive. The next step was to pick up Ron Miller, former USC football star, and, at the time, Walt's son-in-law. The delegation finally arrived at Disney's office.

It was interesting to us that, in spite of the reverence and awe with which these executives treated him, there was nothing we observed in Disney's attitude or manner that asked for such treatment. He was friendly, unassuming, and direct. He insisted that everyone call him Walt.

Our session began with his asking us if we had seen "The Shaggy Dog." We hadn't. He mentioned the titles of several other Disney films, and we had seen none of them. The other executives seemed perturbed. Walt was amused.

"You don't go to movies very often," he smiled.

We thought it better not to respond to that comment. We smiled, too. The meeting was over.

About ten minutes after we arrived home the phone rang. It was Bill Dover.

"I've got orders from Walt," he said, "to find something the Augusts are willing to work on."

We worked for Walt for four tense, but lucrative, years.

They were lucrative because in addition to our flat deal, we were on a substantial four-figure weekly salary. Walt wanted it that way so we would be available to confer with him at short notice.

We came to appreciate that because there were long periods in which he was unavailable for meetings.

One day, during our Disney stint, we received a phone call from our son who had been graduated from U.C. Santa Cruz, but continued to live up there.

"Dad," he asked, "what are the legal ramifications of using a pseudonym?"

"None," I assured him, "so long as it's not used for some illegal purpose."

I also advised him to register any name he used to his social security number.

He thanked me for the information, and I asked him why he wanted to use a name other than his own. He said that he had been offered an assignment to write something he really hated. It was pornographic and repulsive ~~in every way~~. But it was lucrative.

I assured him that he didn't have to do anything he hated that much, just for money. Thanks to Disney, we were in a position to help him without any sacrifice on our part.

He said he preferred to earn his own way. I understood

and respected that.

"Have you thought of the name you're going to use?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Tom August, Junior."

After I scraped myself off the ceiling, and my blood pressure dropped below the boiling point, I persuaded him that it would be better for the entire family if he chose a different name.

Not long after that our agent informed us that Disney wanted us to do still another script for him. We decided that this would be the last one. The wear and tear on our nervous systems was getting to be too much. Each time we went to the studio for a meeting, the fear that someone would turn up and "blow the whistle" on us was too stressful.

We finished the screenplay, and breathed our sighs of relief. We were off the hook. Or so we thought. Walt, however, wanted another.

How could we explain to him that we didn't want to work for him any more? And why?

I don't remember who came up with the obvious solution to the problem. All we had to do was ask for an outrageous increase in our fee. It was the perfect cowards'-way-out, because our agent would bear the brunt of the burden.

He called and reported to us the cries of anguish with which his demands were met. But negotiations were not terminated. We told him to be unyieldingly tough, because we really

wanted out.

As the days passed without our being told to forget the whole thing, the "greed factor" began to emerge. We didn't want to work for Disney again, because of the tension, but if he met the inflated demands... well, the tension would be considerably relieved.

One morning the phone call from our agent came!

He had just arrived at his office, and found a message to call Disney. Clearly, this was it! He promised to report back as soon as he completed his call to the studio.

The minutes passed and became hours. And with each passing moment my fury at our agent's insensitivity mounted. Finally, I called him and started screaming at him. Even if the deal had not been concluded, I said angrily, he should have called to report that fact.

Bob sounded very uncomfortable, and uncharacteristically evasive. Finally, and regretfully, he decided he had to go back on his word. The call from Disney had nothing to do with the deal. Walt had come across a large, full-color painting of Mickey Mouse. He had remembered Helen saying -- in the course of one of our meetings -- that our small daughter was a big fan of Mickey's. Walt wanted to autograph the picture to our daughter, and give it to us as a surprise.

His office had called Bob to get our daughter's first name. Bob didn't know it. In an effort to maintain the surprise element, he had tried, unsuccessfully, to reach various friends of ours who, he thought, might know our daughter's

first name.

Eventually, he got the information. The beautiful full-color portrait of Mickey Mouse arrived. It was, of course, autographed to Ann August. We were not up to explaining the blacklist and pseudonyms to our small daughter. Instead, with great care, we managed to erase "August" from the matte. Our daughter was thrilled to receive the picture.

And, only incidentally, we received the raise our agent demanded.

We met with Walt on still another film. He wanted to do something that satirized conformity. He spoke of it as an increasingly pervasive social ill. A comic treatment of the subject, he felt, would be constructive. We agreed enthusiastically, and agreed to think about it.

There was a record out at the time by a group called "The Womenfolk." It included a song titled, I think, "Little Boxes." The lyrics spoke of "Little boxes on the hillside, and they're all made of ticky-tack..." (I apologize to the songwriters if I've quoted inaccurately.)

We brought the record to our next meeting with Walt. He played it and liked it. He liked it so well, he bought the rights to the song.

Helen and I kicked around various ways of treating the subject. At our next meeting with Walt we presented our ideas, and he seemed receptive. There was, however, something in the atmosphere that gave a strange quality to the meeting. Walt seemed nervous, fidgety; and the give-and-take that had

made previous meetings with him fruitful and stimulating was not there.

When we left I mentioned it to Helen. She was more observant than I was. She not only sensed the difference in Walt's manner, but also noticed that he was not smoking.

Our next meeting was canceled shortly before the appointed time. We never saw Walt again. Within a fairly short time he succumbed to lung cancer.

Our relationship with Walt Disney had been very good from every point of view, but one. We had been confronted with the dilemma that always faced us when the producer-writer relationship worked unusually well. Our impulse was to level with him, to tell him we were using pseudonyms, and why.

However, if we <u>had</u> indulged that urge, we'd have placed him in a position that would require him either to fire us -- or become part of "a conspiracy to evade the blacklist."

We didn't like either of those alternatives.

Many years later we were told by people who were working at Disney's when we were that Walt <u>knew</u> we were blacklisted.

We'd like to believe that, but we have never seen any first-hand evidence of it.

We were offered a post as Story Editors on a television series at 20th Century-Fox. Helen was not comfortable about leaving our young daughter in someone else's care on an every day basis. She suggested that I go for it for myself. If I got it, she would write scripts from time to time.

It was in that primitive long-ago when a half-hour situation comedy had one producer and one story editor. When I was shown into the producer's office he reacted with surprise. We knew each other a long time, but our paths hadn't crossed in recent years. He had seen or read our television work, but had had no clue that the Augusts were us.

He was an extraordinarily able producer, and working with him was one of the most pleasant television-series experiences I've ever had.

One day the Art Director on the series came to my office with a problem. He had made some changes in a set for reasons of efficiency and economy, and wanted me to look at it. The producer was busy with a pilot he was making, and the Art Director wanted to be sure that the changes he made didn't interfere with any story element.

We left my office and walked toward the stage. En route, the Art Director said: "What do you hear from Norm?"

"Norm who?" I asked.

He laughed as though I had uttered a witticism. I said I didn't know what Norm he was talking about.

"Come on," he said, "you know I mean your brother."

"I don't have a brother named Norm," I said.

He looked astonished.

"You're not Norm August's brother?"

"No," I said. "Whoever he is, we're not related at all."

"You must be," he insisted, "you look alike."

I expressed my sympathy for Norm August, and assured the Art Director that it was not likely -- in fact, not possible -- that I was in any way related to his friend, Norm. He was still unconvinced, so I decided to give him the clincher.

"August," I confessed, "is not my real name."

He was taken aback by that information; but only for a moment.

"Maybe," he said, "it isn't Norm's real name either."

Some time later, still working at Fox, I decided to test the water.

I had finished an original screenplay shortly before I started on "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir." I asked my agent to submit it under my real name, and see what happens.

He did.

The script was bought, and an item appeared in one of the trade papers that said, in part: "Tom August, Story Editor of the 20th Century-Fox television series, 'The Ghost and Mrs. Muir,' has sold an original screenplay to Universal which he wrote under the name, Alfred Lewis Levitt."

That seemed to be a hint that the blacklist might be, if not over, on its way out.

Nevertheless, I continued to use Tom August in television because all my tv credits were in that name.

One day, while perusing the Guild Newsletter (a modest forerunner of the elegant journal you are now reading), I saw a list of writers for whom the Guild had residuals, or other

money -- but, for whom the Guild had no current address. On that list was Alfred Lewis Levitt.

I wanted the money, but I remembered that, earlier in the blacklist, the Guild had exposed pseudonyms to the companies. I was reluctant to reveal that August was Levitt -- a conclusion I feared would be drawn, if it were known that August and Levitt were living at the same address. Of course, there was another possible inference, but my paranoia was focused on the blacklist.

The possibility that no one would notice or care about the coinciding addresses never occurred to me.

I called the Guild Residuals Department, as Levitt, and asked that the money due be sent to me at my attorney's address. I was informed that written authorization was required for the Guild to do as I had asked. I promptly complied.

A short time later my attorney forwarded the unopened letter from the Guild to me. I found in it a welcome check from Universal made out to Alfred Lewis Levitt for something I had written pre-blacklist. I was startled by the check stub which said: "aka Tom August"!

Universal, apparently, was one of the first studios to computerize. I had always registered my Social Security number to whatever name I used, and I began to wonder what consequence there would be, now that the Guild knew my true identity.

Mike Franklin, then the Executive Director of the Writers Guild, called my attorney and said he thought it was time

to straighten out the Levitt-August confusion. The three of us agreed that the best course was to resume my own identity, and to use Tom August as a registered pseudonym. It did seem to be an indication that the blacklist was over.

We continued to use the August name for television, and Levitt for features, since all our credits in those media were in those names. The only exceptions were the Disney features we wrote. We used the August names for them, because they started out to be television projects, but were released theatrically before they were played on tv.

For me, the weirdest of ~~my~~ the "name experiences" came at the end of the blacklist when I was doing a screen credit arbitration for the Guild. Marge White headed that department then. Occasionally, when the work load was very heavy, she brought in Mary Dorfman to help out. Mary had worked in that department during the Screen Writers Guild days.

I had resumed my own name. Mary called me in connection with a Policy Review Board. After concluding our business, she said: "Incidentally, Mr. Levitt, I knew your father."

She had known <u>me</u> -- I had become my own father!

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